Interview with Ty Citerman by Hannah Saraisky
Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project
October 28, 2025 via Zoom
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Abstract
In this interview, Ty discusses his Jewish upbringing in St. Louis, his Ashkenazi Jewish roots, and his transition to New York City for college, where he has lived ever since. Ty describes his initial involvement in Kolot, which began in the late 90s, explaining how he was drawn to its community and practices. He reflects on the evolution of Kolot as he got married, raised children, and joined the congregation's leadership team. Ty also discusses his music career and how it has informed much of his involvement in the Jewish community in New York City. Lastly, Ty shares about his activism with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, which is influenced by personal experiences and family history.

This interview has been lightly edited for readability.

Transcript
Hannah Saraisky 0:00
So we're now recording.

Ty Citerman 0:04
Cool, yeah.

Hannah Saraisky
We're in it.

Ty Citerman
We're in it [smiles].

Hannah Saraisky
So I'll start off by just introducing myself. My name is Hannah Saraisky, and you're Ty Citerman, and we're doing this interview for the Kolot Oral History Project. And it is 10 AM on the morning of October 28, 2025, and I'm excited to be here. So is there any place that you want to start off with this interview? Anything you'd like to touch on first?

Ty Citerman 0:31
I'm flexible. I'll follow, follow your lead. Yeah.

Hannah Saraisky
Okay. Well, I remember from our conversation a couple weeks back, you had said that when you were little, you thought that everyone was Jewish, and [laughingly] I just loved that. I thought that was great and I remembered that. And I was wondering if we could start off by talking a little bit about your upbringing and your background in Judaism.

Ty Citerman 0:57
Sure. Yeah. So I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. I was born in 1974. My parents both grew up in St Louis, Missouri. My dad is the son of immigrants who came to the US in 1921 and 22. His father [was] from what was then Romania or Bessarabia. Now it's Moldova. And my grandma, Clara, who I knew quite well from Ukraine — and she came when she was a teenager, 14. He, Albert Citerman, came to the US when he was, I think, 17. I didn't know him. He passed away before I was born, when my dad was pretty young. And my mom's parents were first generation born in the US. So, so she's the granddaughter of immigrants, though they — her parents, my grandparents Rose and Harry — they were born, you know, shortly after their parents came to the US. And because — and that was in the teens — the 19 teens. So they, they were all part of this, like maybe second wave of Eastern European immigration. And my grandmother would always tell me, you know, we came through Ellis Island, but New York and Philadelphia were all already — they were so full we, we and we had Lansman[1] in St. Louis. So, you know, she — when I was a teenager, I got interested in her immigration story. And so she — I interviewed her formally for a college class my freshman year, but I also just started chatting with her when I was in high school. And hearing her stories and becoming fascinated with her.

But, so so my my grandparents were… St Louis at that time, pre World War Two was kind of a robust, industrial city in the Midwest. You know, it's on the Mississippi River, and so there were a lot of opportunities for immigrants, at least white immigrants. And there was a pretty sizable Jewish community. I don't know the numbers then, but I think when I was growing up, there were maybe 50 to 70,000 Jewish people living in St Louis. And St Louis is kind of a sprawling city, but where my parents grew up, the neighborhood is called University City, and it's, kind of the nearest suburb to the the city itself. And that was a Jewish enclave. There was a big like — my father could walk to synagogue, my grandmother walked to synagogue. So that that was a Jewish neighborhood that they grew up in, and then, you know, they… They graduated from high school in 1964 and 65 and that was kind of just as white flight[2] was taking hold, and people went further, we call it, going further out west the western suburbs of St Louis, which just kind of sprawls west into suburbs and exurbs and then rural area. But they were because they were both kind of in different ways, really connected to this Jewish neighborhood and I mean, my dad's mother was orthodox. My parents, my mom's parents, were a bit more assimilation oriented. And so they're — my parents — Jewish lives were different, but they still there, their community, their network of friends, were all Jewish people of their generation, and a lot of them kind of went to college not too far away, and moved back to St Louis. And so when I was born in 74, my parents were friends with a lot of people that they had known a lot of their lives. And it was very kind of — it was like — they had a real community. And most of them were, were these Jewish St. Louisans who were children or grandchildren of immigrants like them. And so they sent me to Jewish nursery school at the reform synagogue that was not too far from where the apartment that we were living in when I was born, it was called the Sherameth. And it was kind of, it's still around — I have very fond memories of it. It's like a classic suburban 1960s, 70s, you know, freestanding building with, you know, lots of land. It's just kind of bananas to me in hindsight, that that, that phenomenon, that was that beat, was such a part of my earliest childhood. And so, you know, the the student Rabbi's name was Susan Talve[3], and she ended up founding a progressive reform synagogue that my parents joined 20 years later. And yeah, I just, I think,

[1] Jeremy Lansman was a community radio broadcaster, producer, and pioneer in St. Louis.
[2] White Flight was the mass movement of white populations from urban areas to suburban areas.
[3] Rabbi Susan Talve is the founding rabbi of Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis.

Jewish nursery school and their network of friends, it I had the sense that everyone was was Jewish. Even though a lot of people, like, we had Jewish Christmas, you know, it was no one was Christian, not even it wasn't even mixed households. But people, Christmas was kind of this cultural, you know, commercial, consumerist Jewish gathering. I mean, we had Hanukkah, but especially in the 70s and 80s, Hanukkah hadn't been ballooned into the mass market phenomenon that it perhaps unfortunately or for[unately]— what, however you see it, you know that it's become now. And, my parents eventually moved to a different suburb that was closer to the city. Not University City, but a suburb called Clayton. And I started public school in kindergarten, and that's… there were some Jewish kids in my class, and also a lot of gentile kids, and that was the first time I went to school with non Jewish kids. I mean, it's fairly early on — it was kindergarten, but it was different.

Hannah Saraisky 9:34
Yeah, thank you. Thank you. Yeah, that's, that's great. And can you talk a little bit about how you ended up in New York City?

Ty Citerman 9:43
Yeah, sure, sorry. [Phone had started to beep]. Let me turn that off. I applied to college — I was interested in going kind of further afield than my parents. And I visited a number of East Coast schools, and Columbia University was one of them, and I loved it. I loved New York. It was my first time in New York City. When I was 17, I drove from St Louis to New York with my dad. It was one of maybe four or five schools in the area that we visited. And I'd never seen anything like the New Jersey Turnpike [Hannah laughs]. I felt like such a country bumpkin. But yeah, the school was very, very interesting to me and the city. And I, kind of— I, in high school, I was pretty — didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, but I was pretty studious, and so I had this sense that I should go to the best school I can get into. And somehow Columbia checked those boxes to the kind of elitism of the Ivy League and…but I just never left. So I moved here for college at 18, and stayed.

Hannah Saraisky 11:33
Nice. Yeah, yeah.

Ty Citerman 11:37
Yeah and, I mean, I think, I think another branch of that was during, during college, I saw different aspects of New York's pretty amazing and varied Jewish communities, like different slices. I mean, I was, I had a part time job teaching at a religious school, at a synagogue, I think my junior year. I went to some different campus events, and I just kind of — Judaism in New York, it was interesting to me, and it was unlike anything I knew from St Louis. That… the very different relationship to assimilation, the unassimilated communities, yeah, it was very, very compelling.

Hannah Saraisky 12:38
Can you talk a little bit more about that— like how, I guess, from college until now, your, your journey within the Jewish community in New York City, and I guess finishing, then, with how you ended up at Kolot/in Kolot.

Ty Citerman 12:52

Yeah, sure. Well, so backing up to St Louis for a moment. You know there, there's a way, especially since I've not lived in St Louis for the longest time, being away from St. Louis, I, I… It's clear to me how heavy the assimilation push is. And that's not particular St. Louis, that's the world there that there are versions of that everywhere. Um… and.. it's, it takes its toll. And I didn't, you know— it's at some point. I think it was maybe when I was 19 or something. Maybe it was earlier, and I hadn't moved to New York yet. I remember telling my parents, like, look, we're done with Jewish Christmas [laughing]! This is — enough is enough. Okay, we're Jews. Why are we doing this? And, I mean, the way this story gets told is my father, kind of, you know, threw his hands up [Ty throws his hands up] and said, 'Finally, thank goodness!' You know, I don't know if that's actually what happened, but there's that version of it [Hannah laughs]. I was, I've been interested in kind of… I've been interested in finding a relationship to Judaism, like, I know I can't— I'm not trying to recreate something from the past— but I do know, like my grandmother, Grandma Clara, is one kind of North Star. Just the way — like she when I would talk to her as an older teenager, she kind of bristled with pride and love of Judaism. And, I mean, there are many things that she believed that I disagreed with, you know, she would not like that I married someone who was raised gentile. You know, fine, but she also, yes, she loved being Jewish, and it was such a core thing for her. And she was interest— she was, she was working class. She was not, she, you know, she didn't go to college. But she, she knew Hebrew, she knew Yiddish, she knew Russian, she knew some Ukrainian. Like it was just this point of connection to people and to ancestry. And just that love of it was so interesting. And so there was a part of me I think that was like, whatever she has, I'm gonna find my version of that. I don't know what it is, but I'm interested. And, and it was a real stark— like she was not interested in Jewish Christmas. That was, she was an unassimilated woman, you know. And I think she tried to raise, you know, my dad's one of three sons, and I think she tried to raise them with Judaism — Judaism, like religion and culture, both kind of intermingled as this core thing. And of course, they were American kids, and my dad also wanted to play basketball, so going to Yeshiva[4] wasn't always what he wanted, mostly not. But in New York, it seemed like, oh, okay, there's, there's — people are figuring things out in that direction. And and so Kolot Chayeinu, I think I was saying, yeah, it was maybe 26 years ago, maybe more, you know— late 90s, after college that I learned about Kolot. And it was, I mean, Kolot has this long standing policy of open door holidays. I mean open door, it's high holidays, but also open door Shabbat, open — just open doors. And I don't remember the first holiday services I went to at Kolot, I wish I did, but, but I do remember those early kind of explorations. And.. and I have some, my, my wife, Megan, works with a woman named Barbara Gross, who's like a generation, not quite a generation older, but is among the the kind of founding generation of Kolot. So I think Barbara and her partner, Ellen. When we would talk to them, they would kind of whisper about this — this is, you might be interested in this place. So, yeah, that's some of it. There's more to say, but that's, that's the, at least the preamble.

Hannah Saraisky 18:59
Yeah, well, I guess I want to hear the most of it.

Ty Citerman
Yeah, sure.

Hannah Saraisky

[4] Jewish educational school/Torah reading and study

I guess, like, what — why do you keep coming back to Kolot, what keeps you involved with the congregation?

Ty Citerman 19:14
So, a, a part of my music work, I think I mentioned, you know, one branch of my music work is playing music for services and for Jewish ritual. I — some Jewish weddings, though I'm not a deep wedding musician. I kind of, you know, dabble when I, when, when asked. So, when I did some work at Kolot. I mean, I think we went to services— I loved Ellen Lippman[5]. You know — her, her his historically, she kind of would lead in a way that… there was plenty of Hebrew, plenty of things I had no idea what she was saying, I had to read the translations and the prayer book. But I was kind of, I was interested in that. You know, there was a part of me that was really uninterested in Reform Judaism, just because it seemed too assimilated. I… and too much like something of my past that — not that I need to reject my past — but grow from and… you know, there are a lot of compelling things that happen in Reform synagogues. But it just seemed like the the Kolot, interest in more… like a more serious approach to liturgy, was strange and interesting to me. But also the political bent towards, you know, Ellen has always spoken on the bimah[6] about issues of justice, and that, that was so that was meaningful to me as a college student, and from, from then on. And this sort of, you know, we just go through motions of holidays and candles and latkes. I thought, okay, there's, there's got to be more here [laughs]. And Ellen offered that and, and so it seemed like there was opportunity to learn very early on. Like this is, yeah, 25 plus years ago, the early days of my kind of Kolot, taste testing.

Also, I was, I was interested in Lisa Siegel[7], you know, before she was a cantor. She — her voice is beautiful, and her — she has an aesthetic curiosity that was interesting. It seemed like she wasn't just going through motions, she she was feeling and in something and exploring. And I loved, like, seeing her move from cantorial soloist to Cantor while I'm becoming a member of Kolot. You know, that was really beautiful. Like it seems so, so honest. And she's also — she's connected to people all over New York. I mean, I saw a concert she did years ago with Frank London of the Klezmatics[8] and other people at the New York Jewish Tenant Museum[9] and and it became clear, like — neither Ellen nor Lisa is interested in kind of sitting at a desk in a musty office, waiting for someone to knock on their door. There is no desk, there's no musty office. So, that that seemed right to me. And it seemed like there was musical learning for me when I would go to services, and, and I started to work with them and a company, and there was more musical learning. I mean, there have been a couple of synagogues where I've learned from people, cantors, and they were among them. So that was, I guess, maybe chapter two of Kolot journey [laughs].

And then then I became a parent, you know, almost 18 years ago. And when my older daughter was born, I mean, we live in Flatbush, there are walkable synagogues, and we — I wasn't gonna walk to Park Slope, because that's — it's a wonderful, long walk. So we started exploring synagogues in Flatbush, and they were, they were different versions of fine, different ways, some orthodox. I've been to a couple of the Orthodox synagogues, but, I mean, I'm not gonna go — I can't go to a synagogue with the

[5] Ellen Lippmann is the founding Rabbi of Kolot Chayeinu
[6] A bimah is a raised platform in a synagogue where services are led
[7] Cantor and longtime member of Kolot Chayeinu
[8] Frank London is an American klezmer musician and trumpeter
[9] The museum, which in on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, preserves the history of immigration and migrant families in tenement buildings in NYC

mechitzah[10], it's just too — I can't have the, you know, women upstairs, men down… It doesn't, it seems too… not right. I need, I need a place that has gender equality. And there was a synagogue here that we joined for a little while. And then, after Hurricane Sandy[11], a neighbor who is a longtime family friend of Megan's[12] died, and we went to the memorial that Ellen Lippman led. And Megan, who, you know, my wife, who is not very who's not, she doesn't identify as religious. She's, you know, kind of adopted the cultural practices of Judaism, but she, she listened to Ellen, eulogize this friend John Cast and — who is a longtime community organizer —and she said, 'Okay, it's clear to me… [Ty closes his eyes] … I can be led by her.' And so that that was kind of — that marked the end of the neighborhood shopping period, and we became members of Kolot short — like official dues paying members — shortly thereafter, whenever that was maybe 2010… 11… I don't remember, when was Hurricane Sandy…

Hannah Saraisky
I think around then, yeah.

Ty Citerman
Yeah, so, 2011 we became dues paying members, give or take. And the 14 years since are the next, the the chapters that followed.

Hannah Saraisky 28:06
And is it so… so both your daughters ended up, were they involved with Kolot? Are they involved with Kolot?

Ty Citerman
Um, so my 17 year old daughter, Zora, she had a B'nai mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah in 2000… [recalling] wait what year… in 2021. It was a pandemic Zoom mitzvah. She went to the Children's Learning Program. She would say, she did not, she was not deeply connected to Children's Learning Program. She really liked her Hebrew tutor a lot — and liked Ellen's successor, Miriam Grossman. Zora really liked her a lot, and liked working with her. But since, I guess whatever 14 or 15, she's kind of drifted into — she'll, she'll go to services for holidays and is not looking to Kolot for community right now [similing]. That's a diplomatic way of putting it, for sure. For Carla, my younger daughter, who — she'll have her bat mitzvah in March. So, I mean, the the pandemic has been differently challenging for her, you know, Zoom children's learning classes, not so great. I think Zora liked the Zoom classes because she could go to them in her pajamas, um, and turn off her camera liberally. Carla and also — there, Carla's had — there have been a couple of friends who have come and gone for different reasons. It's, it's, it's for her, in her own way, it's not been a source of, like, close, connected friendship right now, she has one friend in that program, and I think if she had more friends, she would feel more connected to it. But she, she likes her tutor, and I think she's interested in, she's interested in learning. She's had interest in, in Hebrew letters, but it's, it's a bit of a it's… it's not her central thing either. I think in part because I play a leadership role, there's this kind of them forging their own identities in an age appropriate way [smiles], that is sort of okay. We're not our parents — that one does this stuff — how do we differentiate ourselves… You know, I

[10]A mechitzah is an Orthodox practice in which men and women are separated during prayer services and other religious gatherings to allow for better concentration
[11]Huge hurricane in October 2010 that hit the East Coast of the United States
[12] Ty's wife

kind of see it as like a long game for them. But they, they don't, they don't like to… they, at one point, they would come and help out with family services that I co-led. But that, that day has passed.

Hannah Saraisky 31:40
Well, you mentioned being a leader at Kolot… I know you're on the board… and I guess what, what appeals to you, what drew you into wanting to be a leader at Kolot?

Ty Citerman 31:52
Um, I… so I talked to Barbara a bunch about being on the board. Barbara's [a] veteran board member, she just ended her term. I'm, you know, we talked to you and I about this kind of like reinventing or building a new Jewish institution for the future. And I think Kolot has a lot of potential to keep its vibrant traditions alive. And also it's… it can grow. I think it's a community that can grow. I don't think it's a community that's trying to, you know, plant its flag and stay the course and, and that, I think that's — as synagogues move forward in the United States and wrestle with current challenges…You know, what..what is it… You know, I grew up in, in a world where there was always an Israeli flag and an American flag on the bimah. That's never — there are no flags on the Kolot bimah. I don't want flags on my bimah — I'm not a flag person. I mean, if there's, if there's a gay — gay flag, maybe that's fine. But I don't really care for flags on the bimah. And I feel like, yeah, Kolot's a place that, that has members who are creative and are thinking big, and so I can, as a board member…. it was a few years ago, I think Ellen, Ellen Lippman and I were talking. And this is after she, she had stepped down, and she kind of planted the idea — said, 'Have you ever thought about the board? What do you…' And I said, 'I don't know… I'll… why?' [laughs]. And I kind of… it's a it's a community that… I don't have any heroic notions of being on the board, but I like thinking about groups. I am a decent listener, and I have some ideas about how I imagine our synagogue could grow and move forward. And the people— people on the board are a real interesting crew. And there's this sort of, you know, like, 'Oh, you're interested. Let's talk. What are you interested in? What… what's possible? Here's what…' It was a very organic invitation. And so I also appreciated that — that people on the board wanted to engage. It wasn't sort of buckle your seatbelt, you're here we go. There was no hustle [smiling]. So I liked, I liked that, and it's, it's a creative group. It's a creative and very thoughtful group.

Hannah Saraisky 35:58
Um…you… you talked about being on the board… it's a position that you can… you have an impact on the future of Kolot. And I'm wondering, what are some of those things that you think about? What do you see for Kolot in the next 5, 10, 15 — whatever timeframe —what, what are some, I guess, goals or vision that you have for it?

Ty Citerman 36:24
Yeah, well, so we have our third full time rabbi. And that's very exciting, and I think it'll be interesting to see if, if Sam[13] chooses to stay for another term. I mean, his predecess… his full time predecessor, Miriam, had one term, and she was also younger than he is now. If, if he, he's a very interesting person. I really, I mean, I was part of the rabbinic search process, mostly as a community — I was on a community engagement team — I wasn't a central player in that, but I did play a role. But hearing from the different rabbinic candidates, I was really, I really liked what he had to say about growing community. So I see this

[13]Same Kates-Goldman is Kolot's current rabbi

great opportunity to kind of have long term growth with him as the rabbinic player in that. And, I want to help in whatever way I can with him, kind of having both a public presence and one that invites people who might want to become members, to come to Kolot, and also just his spiritual and, you know, community oriented presence in the — within the synagogue. I imagine at some point in the next 20 years, Cantor Lisa is going to retire. I don't know when that is. Maybe she doesn't want to retire for 40 years. That would make her a pretty elder… if her voice holds out, let's, let's see how long she wants to stay [smiling]. I hope it's a long, long time… but I have no idea, and I imagine she'll want to at some point in the next X years, think about where the cantorial position goes, and I'm sure we've learned a lot from the rabbinic transition about how we might engage at some point in a cantorial transition, but again, I hope that's not for a while.

I also think Kolot's resilience as a… as an institution… both from a financial standpoint and from a membership standpoint, is very important. I mean, members have come, come and gone, especially in the last two years, since October 7, 2023 — for a number of reasons. But a real core group of people, I think, myself included, have said, 'Hey, we're staying. We are, you know, we're not digging in our feet around certain things, but we are recommitting deeply to this synagogue.' And for the possibility of a synagogue to be — I mean, I think there are some Jews, young and not young who have said, 'You know what, forget synagogue life. And I don't want to do that… so I am interested in synagogue life being something that maybe we haven't seen yet, but that is really — it draws in people who maybe weren't raised with the Ashkenazi Jewish traditions that I was raised with.

It's increasingly — it increasingly puts Jews of color at the center. I think Kolot does really well around lifting up women's leadership. And I'm sure there's more to figure out. So that, you know, at a board meeting recently, a woman said, 'Wow, it's nice to see some of the men sticking around to help clean up.' So there, there are plenty of things [laughs] — I mean, this is 2025 there, there are things around gender for us to figure out. I think people are so smart, and there are a lot of teachers of various ilks in Kolot's community. There's just a lot that I think we can learn from each other. Yeah, and… and do. And maybe I mean being in New York City, you know, I was at this meeting with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice[14] a couple months ago at the end of the summer. And one thing we brought up, I mean, Zoran Mamdani[15] hasn't won yet. But one question people raised — this was back in July or August— was, 'Wow, how do we… how do we engage the city, if we are the… if we have power?' How do we not engage from a position of opposition, which is what we've been in — this, this opposition role as progressive Jews for for so long. And so I think you know what? What does a synagogue look like if you're not in a defensive position, but a real growing and building position? I mean, there's, there's a lot that people in Kolot have done around building relationships with Muslim New Yorkers and Christian New Yorkers. And there's plenty more to do to kind of reinvent a kind of — I don't even want to use the word — it's not multiculturalism… but to kind of reinvigorate this sense of people working across coalition, to really show like, 'No, actually, it's not just that we're opposed to all of these things that we're opposed to, which are so prominent in this ridiculous country, but actually this is the resilient picture of what a city can be… this is, this is what organized religion can be.' You know, all the nonsense that gets pumped into people's head in various, quote, unquote, religious houses of worship all over this country,

[14]A New York City based, grassroots organization within the Jewish community that advocates for social justice issues

[15]Zohran Mamdani, the NYC Mayor-Elect, won the mayoral race on November 4, 2025, one week after this interview.

like, ‘Hey, this is a real alternative, and not just one of reaction. I don't know, I'm kind of it seems like we're a place where some things can happen.

Hannah Saraisky 45:21
That's really beautiful and hopeful.

Ty Citerman
Yeah.

Hannah Saraisky
You mentioned your work with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice [JFREJ], and I was wondering if you could just tell me a little bit more about that and how that informs both your work at Kolot and also, I guess, your perception of being a New Yorker in 2025 when there's a lot going on.

Ty Citerman 45:46
Yeah, yeah, um, I knew about JFREJ years ago, and I probably mentioned too, that I was kind of a peripheral JFREJ dabbler. I mean, before there were… [using a commercial-like voice] ‘before there were online petitions and emails flooding your’… before all that, I would go to events some of the time, but I didn't really claim JFREJ. And then, maybe it was just five, six years ago, JFREJ started doing neighborhood-based organizing. And maybe I mentioned to you, you know, because we — our kids go to neighborhood, went to neighborhood public schools — up for elementary school and relatively for middle and high school — but certainly the elementary school community and what happened there, it was kind of a picture of just neighborhood as something really important. And so when JFREJ started doing that work, I just kind of… rekindled something and started going to meetings. And I mean, there, there's so much opportunity in this neighborhood in South Brooklyn. It's a real — it's not a Hasidic neighborhood — but it’s… so it’s not monolithic. There's a lot of different Jewish pockets of community here. And the progressive Jewish pocket, it's — there's, there's the challenge of kind of temporal housing, people who are renters, who come and go. Some of the Orthodox neighbors around us do not just come and go in the same way. And… I mean, I remember looking at the electoral map of Brooklyn after the 2016 election, and thinking, [Ty puts his hand on his head] holy cow, this is, you know, I have friends who live in red states and purple states. I can walk one mile, and there's an entire congressional district that voted for this jackass by an overwhelming majority. I don't have to just do door knocking in Pennsylvania or make phone calls to voters in North Carolina, there's neighborhood stuff to do [Ty says with a smile]. I mean, the the the map is still gonna favor Democrats statewide. I mean, I'm not naive about that. But hey, let's not settle for just Democrats. Let's elect Zoran Mamdani. Let's elect a progressive who can actually offer a more interesting vision. So JFREJ, when JJFREJ… you know the all the different branches of JFREJ's neighborhood work have led me to kind of engage with their combating… how-what do they call it…well, they do a lot of Israel-Palestine as a local issue. And, combating the weaponization of antisemitism, looking at a real analysis of antisemitism. Just people are really smart. And so the organizers — the staff organizers and all the volunteers— like I learn so much from people at JFREJ, and so that's and — there's a lot of crossover with Kolot, and then there's some crossover with my, my union membership. It's just… that's meaningful. And it's kind of — my wife is is a full time community organizer, and I am not, and she's often encouraged me to kind of find my place, that is my place, and JFREJ has been a big part of that that having that leftist political home that embraces Yiddish

performance and is — people are funny and fun and give good book recommendations. And I love the — I love the door knocking. I've learned how to be a much more aggressive yet friendly door knocker [laughs]. I like door knocking. Not everyone does. You know, sometimes people go to door knocking events, and there's this sort of — 'how do you…how do you get past your discomfort?' I'm not, I don't have discomfort, but I've learned to be more persistent and an even better listener. Yeah, I like it. It's good.

Hannah Saraisky 52:12
Nice. Um, I want to talk a little bit more, I guess, both about being Jew — like being Jewish today — but also about your journey with Zionism or anti Zionism and current politics. And you mentioned that, you know, growing up on the bimah, there was an Israeli flag, and that you have no interest in flags. And could you tell me a little bit about your… your journey?

Ty Citerman 52:45
Sure. I — so my grandmother, my grandmother Clara, who, you know, I developed this relationship with, especially as a teen. She got me interested in Yiddish. And, I went to the worker circle 20 years ago and took a Yiddish class, and I was already listening to Yiddish music and learning Yiddish music. And this is also the 90s… In the 80s and 90s, when I moved to New York, New York was this mecca of a third wave of Yiddish culture. And, and I got to know some of those musicians as a young musician. And the interest in Yiddish, it seemed — so much about the language was— it seemed very much something that was directly part of my story. This was the language that my grandmother spoke on the street, not in the synagogue. And you know, this was, this seemed much more like, 'Oh, this is, well, this is the people's language… the Jewish, it's the… or at least the Ashkenazi people's language.' And, my grandmother was also a Zionist. She was a staunch Zionist. She visited Israel a number of times. I mean, one of my father's uncles who was not killed in the Holocaust, moved to Israel in 1920 — well Palestine — in 1929, I think. His uncle Sonja and my grandmother, you know, after her husband, my grandfather Albert, died, she developed a relationship with Albert's brother and children, and grandchildren. And, I mean, this was also… this probably started after the 1967 War.[16] This was a very different time in Israel's history. You know, this was maybe like, especially during the Golda Meir Era,[17] there were not 700,000 settlers living in the West Bank. So for her, as someone who escaped pogroms,[18] Israel meant something very — I mean, it was it saved my father's uncle's life. The two uncles who did not leave Romania, one of them was killed by Nazis, and one of them went into hiding and married a gentile woman and lived his life until he died as a gentile, apparently, and cut off his connection to his family. So that's kind of a rough and common story. And, I didn't think too much about Israel as a kid… you know, Reform Judaism in the 1980s is put coins in the tzedakah box[19] and build… hey, plant a tree on Tu Bishvat.[20] Jerusalem… there are just these… kind of… that it didn't seem insidious. It was just kind of part of the fabric of Judaism. Oh, there's Israel. And Grandma says, go to Israel. Actually, I don't know if you know, but there was the cover story of *The*

[16]Also known as the Six Day War, the 1967 War was fought between Israel and a coalition of Arab states.
[17] Golda Meir was prime minister of Israel from 1969 to 1974. She was the first and the only female head of government.
[18] An organized riot, destruction of property, violence, or killings, which are historically associated with attacks on Jewish people in the Russian
[19]Receptacle for charitable donations in Judaism
[20]Jewish holiday celebrating trees and the environment

New York Times Magazine a year ago. Was about one of the lead organizers from IfNotNow[21], and I'm forgetting her name, but she spent a few years growing up in St. Louis, and her rabbi at the time was Susan Talve, who was my student Rabbi when I went to preschool, and the Rabbi of the synagogue that my parents joined when I was 15. And they still have a relationship with her, and she's wonderful, and she's a Zionist, and she actually said in that article, she said, 'You know, I think we, in the American rabbinic world, we did a disservice as educators… We didn't really…' — and I felt like she was, she was talking to me. She's talking to people who are in their 50s who grew up with that version of kind of soft Zionism. She said, 'You know, I don't think we really taught people the full picture. We just gave them roses.' My words, not her words. But that was really interesting to me.

So — my sister, my younger sister, spent a semester abroad in Israel in college. She was a Middle Eastern Studies major, also at Columbia. And I visited her for the first time, I think, in 1999 that was the first time I ever went to Israel. And I didn't do a Birthright[22] tour, but I did like my sister's version of a Birthright tour. I went to all the places, the kibbutz.[23] It was a fascinating trip. I don't want to make light of it. It was fascinating. And it was also, I remember… I remember getting sick. I had, like, some sort of stomach sickness. And I remember when I was sick — I kept a journal while I was there. I haven't gone back and read that in a while, but I remember thinking, I think I'm also sickened by some of the injustice that I'm seeing, I'm kind of — I remember having this Palestinian cab driver, this Palestinian-Israeli, who told me a little bit about his experience of racism as an Israeli citizen. And this was before the Second Intifada.[24] You know, I could go to the Al Aqsa Mosque.[25] I could visit places that Jews don't really go unless they're, you know, radical right wing provocateurs who are also Prime Minister…And I — it was, it was — it really affected me. The, the whole range of I met a — really lovely people, the beauty and the horror of it, all of it, I kind of saw all of it. And I've been to Israel. I played at the Tel Aviv Jazz Festival. I visited my sister after my older daughter was born, and I visited my sister. She, by the way, she made aliyah[26] five years after that, in 2005. Six years after that, shortly after I got married. And, went there for grad school to study Jewish Philosophy and Education at the Hartman Institute. And she was kind of interested in religion too, though not in a, what I might call a fanatic way…she, she was interested in finding her own path with Judaism and I think also assimilation and being a Jewish woman here. She encountered things that were really challenging. And I think had a different experience in Israel as a Jewish female… in, in ways that were positive. So, I have a sister who's Israeli, and she married an Israeli man. They have Israeli children. It's not theoretical for me — Israel. I have one sister. She lives there. She's never leaving [chuckles] apparently. She lives in Tel Aviv. She… and, and, I think there was — there were conversations after she moved to Israel that I didn't know exactly how to have. I'm not — about what — I've also fielded a lot of the grief and anguish that my parents have expressed over having their daughter move out of the country. I mean, and to a very complicated place. So, there was never a time when I could sit down with my sister and say, 'You know what I wanna, I'm really grappling with some fundamental questions about where you live.'[laughs] It was not so neat and tidy as that.

And in 2021, or 2, I think it was 2, we were going to visit her for the first time in a decade, and we were on the plane, and we had a layover in Istanbul. And as we're landing in Istanbul, this is before

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[21]IfNotNow is an American Jewish activist group that opposes the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip

[22]A free 10–day trip to Israel for young Jewish adults that hope to strengthen Jewish identity

[23]A communal settlement in Israel where members are collectively responsible for the community's well being

[24]A major uprising by Palestinians against Israel and its occupation in 2000

[25] Sacred Muslim mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem

[26] Another way to say "moving to Israel"

Passover, and as we're landing, Megan is like, 'Hey, look at the news. There's some shit happening.' And there was like, these right wing Israelis, I can't remember who led this. There was, there was a provocation at the Al Aqsa Mosque, and then there was, like a Palestinian retaliation. And then there was an army retaliation, in keeping with the IDF[27] practice of, you know, disproportionate force. And it was, it seemed like a real danger, and so we did not go to Tel Aviv. My parents did. We stayed in Istanbul, and it was like the first time in years that Ramadan and Passover were at the same time. And that really hurt my sister and I could not understand how she could think that was normal, that we would just go. And, of course, it didn't lead to World War III, although it did lead to a lot more violence over the coming days. You know, we kind of watched and said, 'Are we going to go? Are we going to go?' And to this day, Megan says, you know, if we had just been traveling as adults without our children, we probably would have gone and just taken a chance, but we're not going to take our children there. While this is — no that's irresponsible. And, my sister fundamentally disagrees with that. You know, we agree about most, many things, but this was a big difficulty.

And after October 7, I decided to engage with real Palestine solidarity work. I mean, I'll say growing up, one of my best friends was Palestinian [sirens in the background]. Is — he lives in California now. He moved to St Louis when he was seven or eight. His… his brother… he and his brother and I, we played in a band together. And his parents were lovely and politically active. You know, in the 80s and 90s. And so I have these kind of, these particular relationships. I mean, I have good friendships with a number of Israeli musicians who are expats who live here. I, I don't have as many, I don't have, like bestie Palestinian friends, but we live in a very…we live in a heavily Pakistani neighborhood, so I have a lot of Muslim neighbors and friends. And, yeah, the solidarity work after October 7 became important to me. And that's been… difficult with my family… not because they disagree — my nuclear upbringing family. I think my sister — she is a leftist Israeli who… they are a beleaguered community in a country that was attacked… and they feel that, they feel hated. And I don't think that's just a feeling. And Israel is, I mean, an unjust society. America is an unjust society. You know, there are many unjust societies. The one where my sister lives that calls itself the Jewish national homeland, which I… you know my friend Marwan, can never move back to Haifa,[28] where his father grew up, until his father was forced out of Haifa in 1948 and walked to Beirut[29] as a child. That's my friend Marwan's story. He'll never live in Haifa. My sister never set foot in Israel until she was, you know, 19, and now she has citizenship. That's not right. Marwan doesn't want to live in Haifa. I'll tell you this. But his father will never visit his childhood home. That's not right. I don't agree with that. So, I think that's, yeah, that, that whole there's so much to figure out there. And I, as one friend of mine, says, you know, 'There are a lot of people who don't have skin in the game who are interested in this.' I have skin in the game, and I am interested in not just being a bystander around justice in that part of the world.

Hannah Saraisky 1:10:57
Thank you for sharing all of that. Yeah, it's really complicated but inspiring to hear you talk about it in such a way that's so… like action oriented and justice oriented, and you want to make a change, which is awesome. I have a question that's pivoting a little bit [Ty nods], but a throughline in all your answers has been music, and you're a musician, and we haven't talked about it yet. So I just— in all of your answers has been music, and you're a musician, and we haven't talked about it yet. So I just want to—

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[27] The Israeli Defense Forces
[28] Haifa is a port city and is third largest city in Israel
[29] The capital and largest city in Lebanon

Ty Citerman
Yeah [laughs].

Hannah Saraisky
I guess we talked about it in our pre-interview conversation a bit more. But yeah, wanted to give some some time to that.

Ty Citerman
Yeah, sure, yeah. So I kind of alluded to New York and the Yiddish music and Klezmer[30] revival of the 80s and 90s. And I, I've always been interested in jazz and improvising music and music that is new. I mean, I love music that is not new too. I listen to a lot of Bach as well, and that is far from new. But, I am interested in the music of my ancestors, and I — this is the place… this has always been the place where some of the most interesting things happening… in Jewish music are happening. And I was joking about this in a class that I teach at Brooklyn College about New York. And I mean, the class is, in part, about New York. It's called Music and Global America, but New York is a central character. And I joked about, you know, songs that talk about New York as the greatest, and, you know, maybe it is, I don't know. I don't care that, that we're the greatest. But certainly some of the most interesting music, Jewish music making is happening here. And as a younger person, starting in college, I just went to concerts, and I was in bands throughout high school, and I was not in a band for the first year or two of college, but then my third year, I started playing in a band and performing. And there, there's… these… there's such diversity. I mean, there's Andy Statman, this orthodox rabbi who is like a virtuoso clarinet mandolin player, who plays klezmer and also bluegrass. And then there's Frank London and the klezmatics. And then there's John Zorn and Mark Rebo and the downtown improvising scene. And there's just, it's so it's like a voluptuous menu of creativity and and, and there's like the whole history of black music and jazz, all of it, it's and then the kind of weirdo contemporary classical music of Steve Rice and John Cage and Elliot Carter, all of this is here, and… and I… .was always listening widely and getting to know people who are in some way connected to any number of these communities as a younger performer. And it seeped into the music I wrote, in some ways… secular music, my melodic voice… and then I started getting interested in writing Yiddish music. But I'll say maybe it was in 2012 or so, I had, I had played this band I played in called Gut Bucket, played at a festival that John Zorn curated at his East Village club Tonic. The festival is called Rock in Opposition, and — so I got to know him, and I called him up when I had gone back to grad school when my younger daughter was born to study music composition, just as like an interesting thing to do. And I asked him if we could talk about Jewish music. And he said, 'Talk about Jewish music… how about you make a record for Tzadik on our radical Jewish culture series, and just explore your questions through making a record. Wouldn't that be more interesting?' [laughs] And so that, that was when I formed my Bop Kabbalah project and started writing music specifically, not just tangentially, but specifically, Jewish music. And I started reading. I read this great book by Abraham Idelsohn called Music and Jewish Culture. I think it was first published in 1927 he was an ethno-musicologist living in Palestine, and that was interesting to read, very — there's a lot of notation, and he kind of talks about Babylonian Music, and Roman [Romania] — all these strains of liturgical, non liturgical music. He's very opinionated, so I found that interesting. And, yeah, I just started this band, and

[30]Traditional Jewish folk music originating in Eastern Europe, characterized by lively and soulful instruments and melodies

we started playing, and I think part it, it brought to the forefront my my identity as a Jewish musician outside of the synagogue, and that remains a part of what I do today as a Jewish musician is I have, I have a Yiddish music project… I like learning Yiddish poems and trying to set them to music. I've even written some of my own Yiddish poems. They're more like haikus that don't rhyme and set them to music. And Bab Kabbalah features two female vocalists, Judith Berkson, who's also a cantor and a really wonderful composer and pianist who similarly plays in the improvising jazz scene, but also the Jewish scene. And then the other singer is this woman, Sara Serpa, who's Portuguese and is not Jewish, and is an amazing singer. And their two voices sound great together. I feel really lucky that they'll sing my music. We don't play as often as I'd like, because Judith lives in California now, and Sara spends most of the summer in Portugal, but she lives here, so yeah. In addition to my — oh and at Kolot, we have the kind of Kolot house band which sometimes plays at services or celebrations. I love the… the Jewish music scene. It's, yeah, there's like an annual festival called Yiddish New York. Last summer, I went to a festival called KlezKanada, which is obviously in Canada, in the mountains, outside of Montreal. And that was really great. Yeah, there's the Jewish music scene. There's a lot of curiosity and a lot of young people and a lot of elders and a lot of cross pollination…. it's great.

Hannah Saraisky 1:20:55
It sounds great. I feel like I don't know much about it at all — and, the fact that there is a Yiddish/Jewish music scene is like, so awesome. I don't know anything about it!

Ty Citerman
[Smiling] It's deep, it's wild, it's wonderful. Yeah.

Hannah Saraisky
That sounds so great.

Ty Citerman
Yeah.

Hannah Saraisky 1:21:13
Is there anything that we, we haven't talked about, that you want to add in?

Ty Citerman
We've talked about a lot [laughs].

Hannah Saraisky
I think so too, yeah.

Ty Citerman
I don't know. I — if there's, if — I'm happy to you know, if there's something that you realize we didn't touch upon, I'm happy to talk again. But, hmm… yeah, I don't know. Good… thorough question asking.

Hannah Saraisky 1:21:47

Thank you. Yeah, no, we covered a lot of my questions. And I, I know we talked about Clara and the way that she talked about Judaism with such joy and and happiness. And I just wanted to say that it was really nice to— I feel like, I don't know about how you perceive the way you're talking about it — but I felt like it was really, this was just a joyful conversation, and I got some of that, that character. So, that — it was really nice to speak with you and hear your story. And thank you for taking the time to do this.

Ty Citerman
Well, yeah, thanks for saying so, and I thanks for your involvement in the project. I hope the class goes well, and I'm interested in listening to more of these interviews. So whatever, whatever's next, keep me posted.

Hannah Saraisky 1:22:42
Sounds good. All right, I'm gonna stop the recording for now.

Ty Citerman
Okay.